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ABSTRACT

This information packet was formulated to help school administrators and other educators in Maine both understand and manage controversies associated with sexuality and HIV/AIDS education. Common tactics used by opponents to these programs are outlined along with effective strategies to manage controversies. First discussed are ways to develop and maintain community support. How to establish and utilize advisory committees and the roles such committees can play during periods of controversy are described. Also provided are ideas on how to involve parents, students, school personnel and opinion leaders, as well as the school board, in HIV/AIDS education. Common opposition tactics such as the public airing of false claims about sexuality and HIV/AIDS education, advocacy for abstinence-based curriculums, requests for copies of curriculums and lesson plans, legal actions, contact of school board members, and the use of the media are summarized. Suggestions are made for working with the media and school board during controversies, emphasizing the importance of keeping staff members and the public informed during these periods. Contains 17 references. (RJM)

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ED 403 502

# LEADING THE WAY ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

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# LEADING THE WAY ON CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

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June, 1992

Maine Department of Education
Bureau of Instruction, Division of Curriculum

**Leading the Way on Controversial Issues**

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## Preface

During the past ten years, as I've helped schools to develop and implement sexuality education programs, anticipating and managing controversy has been a necessary part of the work. Some schools have had an easier time implementing programs, experiencing little or no opposition, while other schools have struggled to have even the most modest of programs accepted. As schools face the challenge of providing students with HIV/AIDS prevention education, for some, controversy is only a distant concern, while for others, it is a reality. In those schools where controversy is a reality, the degree of controversy will range from slight to extreme and the impact will range from no impact to significant impact.

Several observations I made about controversy peaked my interest. First, although those in opposition usually represent a small minority of the community, they can cause a considerable stir which requires enormous efforts on the part of school personnel. Second, those who initiate or lead the attack on a curriculum may not even reside in the community in which they are voicing opposition. Third, the same opposition strategies are cropping up in different communities. And last, while some strategies used by opponents are "successful" in stalling, changing or eliminating curricula in some communities, the same strategies are unsuccessful in other communities. These observations led me to suspect that there was a pattern to the opposition tactics and that there were deliberate strategies which could be employed to successfully combat the tactics.

These suspicions prompted me to study the issue of controversy in connection to sexuality and HIV/AIDS education more closely. I analyzed my experiences with controversy, read all the materials I could gather and interviewed educators and public relations professionals who have confronted controversy. This packet, in which I have provided information, identified common tactics used by opponents and outlined strategies which have been effective in managing controversy, is the result of my study. The intent is to help administrators and other educators better understand controversy and provide suggestions on ways to manage it before and during its occurrences.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the professionals who shared their time, experiences, and insights with me. They were: Cathryn Bradeen Knox, designer and project coordinator for the AIDS Prevention Education Demonstration Project in Waterville and Skowhegan High Schools; Pamela Kimball, Director of Elementary Education for Union 90; Donald Sturgeon, Principal of Old Town High School; Jane Fisher, Director of Public Relations for Family Planning Association; and Richard Dyer, Public Relations Executive for Jackson, Jackson and Company, Wagner, N.H. Their contributions helped to keep the information reality-based.

I would also like to thank Sheryl Benjamin, my associate, for her assistance in writing and editing this material. She displayed endless patience as we revised and then revised again. I also wish to acknowledge, Amy Forbes, a University of Maine student, studying family relations. Her many hours spent searching for material, photocopying and collating helped bring this packet together.

A special thanks to Joni Foster, AIDS Education Coordinator for the Maine Department of Education. Her encouragement, support, advice and commitment of financial resources enabled this packet to be developed.

It is my sincere hope that this packet will prove useful in helping administrators to lead the way through controversial issues and move on to HIV/AIDS prevention education which will make a real difference in the lives of our young people.

Mary Madden
Family Life Educator

## Introduction

### A Word about HIV Prevention Education and Controversy

Developing HIV/AIDS Prevention Education programs is essential if we are to halt the spread of this deadly virus. Schools play a major role in this prevention effort. "They must teach youth how to cope with the demands posed by this epidemic, how to prevent its spread, and how to deal with the needs of those suffering from it" (Cohen, et.al.).

Many communities will develop and implement HIV/AIDS prevention education programs with little or no upset in their communities. However, there is no denying that some have already or will experience varying degrees of controversy over the programs.

The very word controversy may cause you to pack your bags and head for vacation in sunny Hawaii until things quiet down or worse yet, it might cause you to avoid addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS education in your school. It is only natural to question if the development and implementation of HIV/AIDS education is worth the energy that will be required to manage a potential controversy. However, if we keep our focus on the needs of our students and take seriously our responsibility to prepare them to be healthy, productive, contributing members of our society, we must conclude that HIV/AIDS prevention is worth the energy. Long-term commitment and strong leadership skills will be required as you anticipate, prepare for and, if necessary, manage controversy.

The first challenge will be to recognize that controversy is not completely negative. Along with controversy, comes an opportunity to educate a broader segment of the community and the potential to increase community support for your school and its programs. The goal in dealing with controversy is to minimize its negative effects on your curriculum and your school, and move forward toward your goal of educating students on HIV and AIDS.

Relying on information from school administrators and educators who have experienced controversy, personal experiences as a sexuality educator managing controversy, advice from communication and public relations professionals, and many written resources, this packet of information was developed to provide you with ideas for anticipating, preparing for, and managing controversy.

Throughout this packet of information you will notice references to sexuality education. It is helpful to remember that the controversy around HIV/AIDS prevention education is not new. The same issues have been raised about family life and sexuality education. Experience has shown that when we address sexuality issues there will be people who question the schools' role and if our programs on HIV/AIDS are comprehensive they will address sexuality issues.

## Developing and Maintaining Community Support

Surveys and opinion polls repeatedly show a high level of support for sexuality education and HIV/AIDS education (See Figure 1). However, experience has shown that community members and parents need to be **actively** encouraged to acknowledge their support in a public way. These supporters can be powerful allies in advocating for educational programs and will be vital should you face a challenge to your HIV/AIDS education efforts.

Challenges are best met when you are prepared for them. This is also true when faced with the challenges presented by controversy. The best technique for managing controversy is to anticipate it and prepare for it.

There are schools where an HIV/AIDS education instructional program will be developed by school personnel and with minimal exchange of information between the school and the community. This approach is often based on the principle that, if done quietly, controversy can be averted. While this may work for some schools, there are important opportunities missed and potential problems with this approach.

**HIV/AIDS education presents an opportunity to form a partnership with parents.** Parents are concerned about their children and the risk of HIV infection. They want to discuss the issues with their children but admit needing help. A partnership between school personnel and families can provide support for both and enhance the education received by young people at home and in school.

The more people that understand the need for HIV/AIDS prevention education, the school's goals in developing and implementing programs, and are informed about the programs, the more people that will support it should it come under attack. If you have designed the curriculum without involvement from sources other than school personnel, you open yourself up to charges of being insensitive to the communities needs and risk having people view the curriculum with suspicion and mistrust if issues arise later on.

It's important to recognize the different "audiences" who have a stake in HIV/AIDS education and involve them in the development and implementation process. These "audiences" will include: school board members, parents, students, school personnel, community members and professionals from local health and social service agencies.

One of the strategies for developing and maintaining support which brings these "audiences" together is the use of an advisory committee.

FIGURE 1

## PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND HIV/AIDS EDUCATION

1990 Maine Survey of Family Planning Issues (conducted by Atlantic Marketing Research Co., Inc.)

*90% of survey respondents either strongly agree or agree that the State of Maine should provide funding for sexuality education in local communities and public schools.

1988 Lou Harris Poll - Public attitudes toward teenage pregnancy, sex education and birth control.

*95% of adults indicated that teenage pregnancy is a problem.

*89% favor sex education in the schools

*73% favor making birth control information and contraceptives available in school.

1988 - "20th Annual Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools"

*94% of parents think public schools should have HIV/AIDS Education.

*More than 80% of parents want their children to be taught about safe sex as a way of preventing AIDS.

1986 Time Magazine Poll

*86% of adults agree that sex education should be taught in schools.

*90% of parents want their children to learn about AIDS, STDs and birth control.

*70% - 80% of adults want premarital sex, sexual intercourse, abortion and homosexuality discussed in the classroom.

1985 Lou Harris Poll

*85% of adults agree that sex education should be taught in schools.

*67% favor requiring public schools to establish links with family planning clinics so that teenagers can learn about contraceptives and obtain them.

**a. Establishing and Utilizing an Advisory Committee**

School districts with advisory committees are more likely to report high levels of community support for their HIV/AIDS prevention programs (Scales). Administrators and educators whom I interviewed cited advisory committees as essential in the curriculum development and implementation process. Advisory committees can play a pivotal role in developing understanding and support for the curriculum.

While it is important that the advisory committee be composed of persons that have an interest and/or stake in HIV/AIDS education, you may not need to start from scratch in your recruiting efforts. Is there another committee which could logically serve as the AIDS education advisory committee, perhaps by just adding several ad hoc members, ie... a health education committee or a drug and alcohol abuse prevention team?

Suggestions for advisory committee members:

1. School administrator.

2. School personnel - possibly several members of the AIDS Prevention Team.

3. Students - typically we forget to include students in curriculum development efforts, but in this case, they have the most important information about what needs to be included in prevention efforts. Several students (middle school to high school) should be invited to join the committee.

4. Parents - several parents should be recruited to serve on the committee. It is important to know the parents you choose and be familiar with their stance on HIV/AIDS education. Several sources suggest that parents should represent a range of positions but would not recommend recruiting those who are part of the strong organized opposition group. These parents are often unwilling to make any compromise on the issues and may be more interested in stalling the program development efforts.

5. Medical Professionals - these people are seen as being very credible in dealing with health issues. Their opinions are respected by a large portion of the community. It is important to try and involve a medical professional that has contact and knowledge of young people, recognizes their sexual behaviors and acknowledges their risks.

6. Opinion leaders - these are the people in your community whose opinions are listened to and respected by other community members. They may include: clergy, business people, professionals from community agencies, town council members, or, persons not necessarily in a "prominent position" but who know a lot of what goes on and have contact with many people in the community.

Effective Use of the Advisory Committee:

1. Choose a chairperson that has strong facilitation skills, who will be able to assure that all sides of an issue are heard, decisions are clear and forward movement is maintained.

2. At the first meeting, set clear guidelines on how the committee will operate, clarify how decisions will be reached when there is a difference of opinion, who will act as the official spokesperson and what the functions and expectations are of the committee members.

3. Keep an accurate record of all that happens at meetings, especially the decisions reached.

Suggested Roles:

1. Keep groups and individuals outside of the advisory committee informed about the progress being made on the curriculum.

2. Represent and share various opinions on what should be included in a curriculum.

3. Identify the goals of HIV/AIDS education.

4. Review materials and provide feedback to those developing the program content. Provide input on how potentially controversial issues should be handled.

5. Review materials to be included in the curriculum and provide feedback on their appropriateness.

6. Plan strategies to involve and educate parents and rally their support for the HIV/AIDS education program.

7. Develop strategies for handling concerns about the HIV/AIDS education program, including a controversial issues policy.

8. Meet with school board members to discuss HIV/AIDS prevention education and solicit their support.

**b. Involving Parents**

Parent participation is critical to the acceptance and success of your school's HIV/AIDS prevention efforts. One study of twenty-three communities and their experiences developing and implementing sexuality education showed that communities which significantly involved parents had more comprehensive curriculums and conflict was either rare or absent (Scales).

It is important to remember that polls show that a majority of parents support sexuality education. Experience in Maine has shown this to be true. When given the option of removing their child from classes where sexuality education is to be taught, fewer than 1% of parents exercise this option.

Despite this fact, you will most likely be faced with some parents that are concerned about sexuality or HIV/AIDS Education in school. These parents will range from those who have questions to those who are extremely opposed. It is important to take into account parents' views.

Strategies to involve parents:

1. Recognize and publicly acknowledge that schools need to work in partnership with parents to educate children about sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

2. Include several parents on the advisory committee.

3. Send home an informational letter about the program and encourage parents to discuss it with their children.

4. Arrange for a parent workshop on "Talking with your child about HIV/AIDS". This might be done through the PTA/PTO or adult education program if one exists in your school.

5. Provide parents with the option of removing their child from segments of the program to which they object. This type of policy has helped to reduce the amount of controversy schools experience.

**c. Involving Students**

The very people we hope to effect by our HIV/AIDS education efforts are the ones most often excluded from the planning process. Most times we fail to ask students what will help them to protect themselves against HIV infection. Middle school and high school students have a wealth of information, we only need ask. A program is likely to gain support if it can be shown that it has been designed to meet the expressed needs of the students.

Strategies:

1. Include several students on the advisory committee.

2. Solicit students ideas about what young people need to learn about HIV and AIDS in order to protect themselves from infection and learn to live in a world where AIDS exists. Ask them how they would like to learn this information. Surveys or focus groups will be helpful in acquiring this information.

3. Build a student evaluation into the curriculum, asking what they learned and what else they would like to have learned. Use these evaluations to revise programs, to justify the inclusion of potential controversial material and to publicize what students are learning from the program.

**d. Involving School Personnel**

Teachers are the key to successfully implementing the HIV/AIDS curriculum. Those staff not involved in the actual implementation will be needed to demonstrate support for the curriculum. In addition, school personnel will also be looked upon by community members as "knowing" what's going on in the school. Make sure they do know.

Strategies:

1. Provide periodic updates about the curriculum at staff meetings.

2. Provide HIV education for all staff including periodic updates, including universal body fluid precautions.

3. Include school personnel on the advisory committee.

4. Ask teachers who will be teaching the curriculum for input during the development process. Also, ask them to respond to a draft of the curriculum.

5. Assess the training needs of teachers who will be expected to teach the curriculum and provide ongoing training around those needs.

**e. Involving Opinion Leaders**

Opinion leaders are those individuals in your community who are seen by others as a reliable source of information and whose opinion is respected by others in the community. Often, opinion leaders will be found in "prominent" positions, ie., town/city council, leading business professionals or a clergy person. However, this may not necessarily be the case. The opinion leader may simply be someone who is held in high esteem in your community.

Strategies:

1. Prior to undertaking the development or expansion of an education effort, it is helpful to contact a few opinion leaders, let them know what you hope to do and that it is reasonable to expect some controversy to arise. Ask if they would share their thoughts and if they would be willing to publicly support the effort.

2. Include opinion leaders on the advisory committee.

3. Have the advisory committee meet with individual opinion leaders to explain the program and enlist their support.

4. Develop collaborative relationships between schools, health and social service agencies and community agencies which serve youth.

5. Arrange to speak at a meeting of a local community organization which includes opinion leaders. Use the opportunity to explain the need for HIV/AIDS education, the goals of the program and to share ideas on how members of the organization can support the effort.

## School Board Support for HIV/AIDS Education

Ultimately, the responsibility for HIV/AIDS education implementation rests with the local school boards. Perhaps no element is more critical to the smooth creation and integration of this education than the school board's established policies and practices.

A framework of board policies can help minimize controversy and ensure that issues have broad-based support. For districts that choose to have one policy which covers all health related issues, it must be made clear to parents and teachers that HIV/AIDS education will fall within these guidelines. Another strategy is to adopt a separate policy which gives the board a sound understanding about HIV/AIDS education and highlights the urgency for such programs. Such a policy can: allay concerns that this education is happening in an ad hoc manner; specify that the schools integrate HIV/AIDS education into existing health, family life, and other subject areas and that appropriate information be given at every grade level each year; provide staff development to school staff on content; and assure parents that they have the option to excuse their children from class if they do not wish them to participate. Whether a board decides to adopt a separate policy or include it into their existing policy, the driving force of any policy is the board's public statement to the community: We care about our young people, and we want to protect their lives and health (NSBA).

Critical elements of a policy framework related to HIV/AIDS education include policies concerning:

1. The school district's public information program.
2. How the board involves the school community in decision making.
3. The process for curriculum development, adoption, implementation, and evaluation.
4. How concerns about curriculum, instructional materials and personnel are handled. (NSBA).

Figure 2 is one example of a controversial issues policy which covers sensitive issues, not only those relating to HIV/AIDS. Each district should write their policy based upon their own needs, so as to reflect their community values.

Figure 3 shows an example of how concerns about curriculum/subject material can be handled. A clearly defined procedure when followed can make the process more efficient for everyone involved.

Figure 4 is a policy and procedure example used in a high school health course.

Also essential, are policies supporting school board member training and education (NSBA). When new members are added, they will need to be cognizant of policies and information relating to the issues. A strong, cohesive school board, with members advocating for HIV/AIDS education programs, will do much to avert potential problems.

Figure 2:

**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES POLICY**

In our society, we are exposed to a wide range of ideas and values. It is important that students realize that, although people have differing values, not all values or value systems are equally acceptable within the framework of societal living. One role of the school is to introduce or discuss issues of concern to the community. These issues may be considered controversial since differing religious, moral, and ethical views are present in all communities. The School Committee supports the discussion of controversial issues in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation of all sides of the issues. For the purpose of this policy, a controversial issue will be considered an issue involving but not limited to religious, moral or ethical beliefs.

It is important that students realize that they are members of a society and culture with responsibilities to that society. At the same time realizing they are unique as individuals and need to learn to cope with the structures of the society in which they find themselves.

One role of an educator is to assist students in knowing what value is and how it effects the decisions that people make. Care will be taken to protect the privacy and feelings of the students and families. Students and teachers shall respect the fact that all families do not function in exactly the same manner due to variety of circumstances that may be conducive to that family relationship.

To promote the fair and appropriate consideration of controversial issues in the instructional setting, the following principles are established:

a. All discussion of a controversial issue will be conducted in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation of all sides of the issue. Educators must be fully aware of their responsibility to have all viewpoints presented.

b. The handling of a controversial issue in classes should be free from the assumption that there is only one correct opinion. Ideas should emerge from discussion and not from authoritative instruction. The purpose is to have students see, as fully as possible, all sides of the question and begin to develop their own techniques for the consideration of controversial issues.

c. A controversial issue is to be discussed by an educator prepared for the responsibility. The educator should be comfortable with the issue to be discussed in class and prepared to successfully handle the issue personally. If she/he feels there is a need for professional development in a certain area of the curriculum the administrator should be notified prior to teaching the curriculum. If the

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educator's concern is of a personal nature an alternative method for covering that classroom material should be explored e.g. team teaching with another educator.

Adapted from policies under consideration in Union #96

Figure 3:

**PROCEDURES FOR ADDRESSING CONCERNS UNDER THE CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES POLICY**

I. General Procedures:

A. The parent will contact the principal to set up a meeting with appropriate staff members to review the specific curriculum areas in question. The parent will meet with the selected staff to discuss concerns and rationale for the curriculum and it's delivery. If the parent requests that the child be released from specific portions of the curriculum, educational alternatives will be discussed. (See part II)

B. If the parent and staff cannot reach agreement, they may request a meeting with the principal. A written request for release from instruction must be submitted prior to this meeting. The request must include:

1. Student's name and grade level,
2. Name of teacher and subject,
3. Specific topics, materials or methods in question,
4. Reasons for concerns,
5. And, preferred alternatives to regular scheduled instruction.

C. Should the parent, staff members, and principal fail to reach an acceptable agreement through the above process, the parent will be referred to the Superintendent of Schools.

D. If the parent finds the decision of the Superintendent unacceptable, a hearing may be requested before the School Committee.

II. Educational Alternatives:

A. If an objection to an audio-visual resource is not resolved, a written assignment on the topic may be substituted.

B. If an objection to a print resource (e.g. text, pamphlet) is not resolved, another print resource on the subject may be substituted.

C. If a specific topic or teaching method, within one or more areas of the curriculum, is objectionable, an independent assignment(s) on a related subject will be selected and evaluated by the classroom teacher. The parent may assist in the selection of independent assignments. Because of State educational requirements, a child may not be excused from many parts of the curriculum unless an alternative plan is developed. School staff will work with the parent(s) to create an educationally appropriate compromise.

D. If a parent objects to scheduled instruction in an entire curriculum area, an alternative educational plan for home or other outside instruction must be submitted in writing. This plan must be approved by the local School Committee and/or State Department of Education. The plan must include curriculum objectives, content outline, activities, resource list and evaluation criteria. The Superintendent's Office should be contacted for more information on this option.

PARENT'S OBJECTION TO CURRICULUM TOPIC OR MATERIAL

Child's Name _____ Date _____

Grade _____ Teacher's Name _____

Subject _____

1. What topic(s) or material(s) are you concerned about?

_____

_____

2. Please explain the reason for your concern.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. What do you propose as an alternative to the material or topic for your child?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Please indicate days/times when you can meet with the Principal and teacher(s) to discuss your concern and plan possible alternatives.

_____

_____
PARENT SIGNATURE

Figure 4

**HEALTH COURSE POLICY AND PROCEDURE FOR 1991-92**

1. All students are required to take the regular semester long health course at some time to qualify for a high school diploma.

2. Parents will be sent a copy of the health curriculum at the beginning of the semester to review and will be asked to sign a form indicating that they have received the information.

3. Parents will be encouraged to contact the health teacher to discuss any concerns regarding the curriculum.

4. Parents who have objections to the curriculum may submit these to the teacher on a form that will be provided upon request.

5. If an objection cannot be resolved, the parent may elect to provide an alternate means for their son/daughter to receive the required information within the following stipulations:

   A. The student will be responsible for all material that is covered in the course and will be tested with all other students.

   B. If the alternate means of instruction involves the student being absent from the classroom, this absence will count toward the limit of 13 which is the maximum allowed before credit is lost. A student who exceeds the limit due to being held out of class for objections to parts of the curriculum and loses credit but still passes the course, may still use the course to meet the health graduation requirement as long as no more than a grand total of 25 days has been missed for any reason. Extenuating circumstances will be reviewed on an individual basis.

   C. The responsibility of not having the student exposed to the objectionable material rests with the student and parent. The student must identify if material under discussion fits into the objectionable area and assume the responsibility of avoiding class contact with this material. A procedure will be established between teacher and student to facilitate this need.

Example provided by Old Town High School

**Managing Opposition to HIV/AIDS and Sexuality Education**

Opposition to HIV/AIDS education varies in different communities. If you find your school confronted with a controversy, it is important to know who the parent or community members are that are raising objections to your program. Opponents will range from individual parents who believe that it is not the schools' role to provide this education to organized groups that have connections with state and national organizations.

Some parents may have questions about the content and voice concern about "who" will teach it, the level of teacher training and how the program will handle values issues. Be careful not to label these individuals as opponents. Many times, if these parents are given open, honest answers to their questions and opportunities to preview materials they will come around to supporting the program. Other parents may object to the program based on personal or religious beliefs which oppose school-based discussion of sexuality issues and want to assure that they will have control over whether or not their own child participates. These parents may not wish to block other children's access to the curriculum but only want the option of excusing their own child.

Another type of opposition comes from individuals or groups who are strongly opposed to sexuality education or HIV/AIDS education. Often, they are of the belief that schools do **NOT** have a legitimate role in teaching about these issues. In some instances, these opponents are connected to state or national groups which take platforms opposing a variety of sexuality and reproductive issues. These groups publish materials informing parents about the "horrors" and "detrimental effects" of sexuality education. Supporters of sexuality and HIV/AIDS education are accused of being immoral, hiding information from parents and encouraging young people to have sex. Suggestions on ways parents can influence school-based programs are provided.

Minimizing the negative effects that strong opponents have on your programs will necessitate that you know who your opponents are, understand their tactics and be able to effectively respond. I have identified the following tactics commonly used by opponents and possible strategies for responding. Individuals will need to choose strategies which are suited to their situation.

<u>TACTICS</u>:

a. Publicly articulate false claims about sexuality and HIV/AIDS education
b. Advocacy for abstinence-only curriculums
c. Requests for copies of all curriculum materials and lesson plans
d. Implications of legal action
e. Contact with school board members
f. Use the media to air concerns

## Opposition Tactics

a. Publicly articulate false claims about sexuality and HIV/AIDS prevention education.

Opponents will often challenge sexuality and HIV/AIDS curriculum by making public statements about the intent, content and effects of such curriculum which play on the fears many adults have about adolescent sexuality. These statements, left unchallenged, can garner support for the opposition's viewpoint. In choosing whether or not to respond to statements, it is important to remember that you will not change the opinions of those making the statements. Rather, you can use this as an opportunity to educate parents and community members about the need for sexuality and HIV/AIDS education and the rationale behind your curriculum.

The following are some common statements used by opponents and examples of effective responses.

### Opposition Statements and Sample Responses

***Opposition Statement:***

Sexuality education is the responsibility of parents. Schools have no business teaching about morality issues.

***Response:***

Sexuality education **is** the responsibility of parents. They have been educating their children about sexuality since the day they were born. However, parents are not the only sexuality educators of their children. Young people will learn about sexuality from many sources including peers and the media.

It is the role of schools to prepare young people for the future. This includes teaching them the information and skills that will enable them to make healthful decisions about their sexuality. This education is not meant to replace the education parents provide but to supplement it.

***Opposition Statement:***

Sexuality education is not working. The pregnancy rate for teenagers has increased.

***Response:***

It's difficult to measure the impact that sexuality education has on teenage pregnancy rates since there is no standard for the quality and quantity of sexuality education taught by schools across the U.S. and in Maine. Significant reductions in teenage pregnancy will require that families, school and communities work together to effect the many factors which play into teenage pregnancy.

It is interesting to note that despite the variation in school-based sexuality education programs there have been positive signs in the rates of teenage pregnancy. In the U.S., the number of teenage pregnancies and the rate of teenage pregnancy (the number of pregnancies per 1000 women aged 15-19) have decreased since 1980 and have stabilized over the past few years (Tew). In Maine, for the same time period, the teenage pregnancy rate stabilized. In 1980 it was 69.6 per 1000 and in 1989, 67.3 per 1000 (Maine Vital Stats.).

***Opposition Statement:***

Sexuality education is value-free and immoral and/or sexuality education opposes parents values.

***Response:***

Most sexuality education curriculums promote fundamental values which emphasize the advantages of knowledge over ignorance and the principal of relating to others in ways that increase and support dignity, worth and equality. Individuals are encouraged to clarify their personal and family values and to act accordingly.

***Opposition Statement:***

Parents/communities don't want sexuality or HIV/AIDS education.

***Response:***

Public opinion polls have repeatedly shown that the majority of parents and community members support school-based sexuality and HIV/AIDS education. Those individuals who strongly oppose this education are often very vocal and persistent, causing their numbers to be overestimated. Very few parents, when given the option of removing their child from sexuality or HIV/AIDS prevention classes, exercise this option.

***Opposition Statement:***

Sexuality education encourages young people to have intercourse.

***Response:***

Sexuality education encourages young people to make thoughtful decisions about sexual intercourse after looking at the potential consequences. Abstinence from sexual intercourse is most often emphasized as a desirable choice for adolescents.

Studies show that young people who have had a sexuality education course are no more likely to have intercourse than those who have never taken a course (Zelnick, Kirby, Zabin, Dawson). In fact, many young people initiate intercourse **before** they ever have a sexuality education course (Marsiglio). Sexually active 17 and 18 year old women are more likely to use an effective contraceptive method if they have taken a sexuality education course (Marsiglio).

***Opposition statement:***

The availability of contraception causes teens to become sexually active.

***Response:***

There is no research showing that the availability of contraception has an influence on teenagers' decisions to become or not become sexually active. We know that nearly 90% of teens who come to family planning clinics do so **after** their first intercourse and most wait more than a year (Kisker). One study of a cooperative school program and community-based clinic showed that the availability of contraceptive services did not increase sexual activity (Zabin).

***Opposition Statement:***

Condoms are not effective against AIDS and it's dangerous to tell young people that they are.

***Response:***

It is important for young people to learn that abstinence from vaginal, anal or oral sex and IV drugs is the best way to protect themselves from becoming infected with HIV. However, we must also recognize that slightly more than half of our teenagers will engage in sexual intercourse by age 17 and by age 19 approximately three quarters will have experienced intercourse (National Center for Health Statistics).

Condoms are not 100% effective but they have been shown to significantly reduce a person's chance of contracting HIV (Hatcher). It is dangerous and irresponsible **not** to teach young people that condoms can help protect them against HIV infection.

b. Advocacy of Abstinence-Only Curriculums

Opponents of sexuality and HIV/AIDS education have come to realize that the majority of people believe that young people need to be exposed to this education. Rather than outright opposing all curriculums, they will often introduce an "alternative" curriculum for administrators and school boards to consider. At first glance, these "alternative" curriculums may be appealing, especially since they advocate for adolescents being abstinent, a stance most adults can support. However, these curriculums may seriously constrict the subject material and/or reduce sexuality education to limited sessions on anatomy and physiology, chastity and monogamy.

The authors of *Winning the Battle: Developing Support for Sexuality and HIV/AIDS Education* suggest that "alternative" curriculums usually have the following features in common:

- A complete emphasis on abstinence from all sexual activity and on helping youth develop "saying no" techniques with little or no mention of developing decision-making skills.

- Premarital sex is presented as destructive behavior with tragic physical and emotional consequences.

- Human sexuality is referred to in absolutes of "right" and "wrong" or "wholesome" topics.

- An emphasis on contraceptive failures with little or no information on contraceptive methods.

- Avoidance of any discussion about alternative lifestyles.

- Sexual behavior is portrayed as acceptable only within marriage for procreative purposes.

- A strict definition of family as a blood or legal relationship with a negation of other forms of family and a denial of the changing structure of the American family.

- Objection to values clarification exercises, which strive to teach students to clarify their own values concerning sexuality and make practical, intelligent decisions.

(Haffner)

Two "alternative" curriculums available are "Sex Respect" and "Teen Aid". In Maine, "Sex Respect" is the "alternative" curriculum most often recommended by opponents. Supporters of these "alternative" curriculums will claim that they have been proven to reduce teenage pregnancy and to increase the numbers of teens who are abstinent from "premarital relations". **These claims are false**. A close look at the method of evaluation shows it to be inadequate and the interpretation of the evaluation totally unfounded. In the appendix, you will find two articles - "Sex Respect: A Problematic Public School Sexuality Curriculum" and "Desperately Seeking Abstinence", which critique these

"alternative" curriculums and discuss the numerous problems with each. If opponents are advocating for either "alternative" curriculums, it is essential that you provide school board members with critiques of them. (Additional critiques on "Sex Respect" are available by contacting the author).

c. Requests for Copies of Educational Materials and Lesson Plans

All parents can gain a better perspective on what is being taught by reviewing teaching materials. In fact, some schools send home curriculum outlines or make the materials available at open houses and parent information nights.

Publications by organizations opposing sexuality and HIV/AIDS curriculum encourage parents to review and evaluate curriculum. One such article suggests that the first step in determining the nature of your children's sex education program is to examine the contents. "If you don't feel competent to judge the quality or bias of the materials, then ask for help from someone whose opinion you value. For example, you might enlist your pastor since clergy usually have the training and critical judgment to assess the meaning of the written word. If you know other parents who share your concern, ask one or more of them to join in the evaluation." (Wright)

When evaluating curriculum, parents are encouraged to apply the following questions:

a. Does the program encourage young people to engage in sexual intercourse or does it send a clear message of abstinence and self-restraint?

b. Does the program violate community standards of taste and decency?

c. Does the program present traditional viewpoints toward sexuality as well as those of more permissive individuals and organizations? If so, does it present them in comparable detail and with the same degree of objectivity or sympathy? (Wright)

In some cases, opponents have not been satisfied with opportunities to preview the materials at the school but instead request, by mail, copies of all materials including teachers' lesson plans and audiovisual materials. It can be overwhelming for staff who have many responsibilities to spend their time photocopying and mailing materials. Figure 5 is a copy of a letter received by Penquis Family Life Education Services from a well-known opponent in the area. This request mirrors the requests this opponent has made of a number of schools.

In responding, it is important to assure that the curriculum is available at the school during normal operating hours for preview by the public. Since curriculums are considered public information, members of the public have the right to access these

materials. However, the law does not require that staff spend time or money photocopying and mailing written materials. In fact, the reproduction of audiovisual materials is prohibited by copyright laws. In the opinion of Jeffrey Frankel, Assistant Attorney General and General Liaison to the Maine Department of Education, teachers' lesson plans are not considered public record, unless normally kept on file for the public and need not be made available.

Figure 5:

October 18, 1991

Mary Madden, Coordinator
Family Life Education Services
Bangor, ME 04401

Dear Ms. Madden:

Thank you for your letter of October 4 and the enclosed critiques of the Sex Respect Curriculum and the brochure describing the services available from Family Life Education Services.

I'm very interested in learning more about the comprehensive sexuality education curriculum for grades four through twelve. It's my understanding that since your organization is funded by state and federal agencies, the model curriculum is accessible to citizens under Maine's freedom of access law. Please send me a copy of your grant application to the Maine Department of Human Services, Division of Maternal and Child Health, and a copy of Grant #01-H-000233-15 from the US Department of Health and Human Services/Public Health Service.

Please advise how many pages of material make up the model curriculum for each grade, four through twelve. Depending on the volume of material involved, I would like to either pay reasonable copying costs to have the records mailed to me, or make an appointment to inspect the material at your office.

If there is a curriculum synopsis or outline available, please provide me with a copy.

I am also interested in the sexuality topics covered by your guest speakers. please provide me with summaries of your presentations on sex-role stereotypes, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, sexual orientation, birth control, and pregnancy options.

Finally, please provide me with a descriptive list of resources available from your lending library.

I wish to thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,
John Doe

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d. Implications of Legal Action

One school administrator described how each letter he received from an opponent who was requesting copies of all materials ended with "cc: legal counsel". The administrator replied by adding "cc: legal counsel" to all his written correspondence with the opponent!

Threats or implications of legal action are commonly made by opponents, although, nationally there have been few instances when legal action is pursued. The laws most often cited by opponents are the Freedom of Access law and the Family Education and Privacy Acts.

According to William Fearen, former chairman of the NSBA Council of School Attorneys, "School curriculum designed to educate children about HIV likely will withstand legal challenges by parents objecting to course content." If there are objections that the course content includes discussion of sex outside of monogamous marriage, says Fearen, the courts will view HIV as a public health concern and not support curriculum attacks on religious grounds. He says the HIV issue is similar to the courts upholding, over parents religious objections, school district policies that require, for public health reasons, immunization against communicable diseases.

An additional reason that HIV instruction probably will be protected by the courts, says Fearen, is that courts are reluctant to second-guess the local school board's curriculum choices so long as they fall within the guidelines established by the state board of education. Parents first must exhaust established administrative procedures before seeking relief from the courts; courts uniformly have rejected parental complaints that sex education violates parents rights to free exercise of religion or to privacy. To have the best chance of defending a mandatory curriculum addressing the sensitive subjects of sex, condoms, and other related matters, he says, school districts must make their programs legally defensible by involving parents and the community, by including abstinence as a form of HIV prevention, and by providing plenty of proof that the instruction is needed. (Cohen, et.AL)"

In dealing with these implications and threats, one should not allow themselves to be paralyzed. Rather, it is wise to consult with your legal counsel, act accordingly and move on. Legal counsel for the Maine Department of Education has also been extremely helpful to districts who have experienced legal threats. You might also benefit from discussing with other administrators the advice they have received from legal counsel.

e. Contact with School Board Members

School Board members, both individually and as a committee, are more likely to hear opponents of sexuality and HIV/AIDS education than proponents. This can leave the board with the impression that opponents outnumber proponents.

Opponents will be persistent in their efforts to influence the school board's decisions about programs, policies and curriculum. They will initiate contact with individuals and the board as a whole through telephone calls, letters and public forums. Figure 6 is a copy of a letter sent to the chairperson of a School Committee considering implementation of a pilot program in HIV Prevention prior to the committee's vote.

Figure 6:

Nov 7, 1990

Mr John Doe
Superintendent of Schools
Anytown Public Schools

Dear Mr. Doe and members of the School Board:

As you are all well aware the need for AIDS education is obvious. The question is not whether it should be taught but what should be taught. The proposed AIDS Project, initiated under Family Planning, is neither innovative nor unique, in spite of te "hype" surrounding it. A "hands on" approach with open, frank discussions and practical application has already been instituted in various portions of the country. The net result has been GREATER, not lesser, promiscuity and a correlative rise in teen pregnancies and abortions. Since it is widely understood that condoms have a high failure rate, (up to 17%), the only Safe Sex program will be one that decreases sexual activity.

The questions than becomes, it there such a program and has it been demonstrated to be successful at CHANGING BEHAVIOR? The answer is a resounding YES.

You have been given information regarding a couple of these proven, alternative programs! In one of the schools where one of these programs was implemented the teen pregnancy rate dropped from 140 to just 20 in the very first year! Not because they were tutuored in the techniques of proper condom use but because there were taught that abstininces was the ONLY option, (not one of several options), that guaranteed safety.

The programs do not present sexualtiy as some sort of taboo but rather stress the beauty of sexuality in its proper context! It is NOT a "let's scare them to death approach" but one that recognizes their personality and emotions treating the person as a whole being.

The reason objections have not arisen earlier in the project, I suspect, are that few really knew what the program was all about and still do not! After reading over the eight page handout regarding the project

(cont.)

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continued from previous page

distributed at the last Board meeting, there was very little that would raise a red flag to a concerned parent and school board. It all sounds very good on the surface but some harder questions need to be asked.

On page five of the handout, under objective three, someone needs to pin the AIDS comittee down as to what exactly it means "...to gain skills such as those that result in safer sex practices."

I would also hope the school Board would want to probe a bit deeper regarding the objectives for the course handed out a few meetings back, (if in fact you even received it). The scant progress report given to the board was thoroughly benign and uninformative. I believe the parents of Waterville desire our school board to be a bit more inquisitive as to what is being proposed not merely where AIDS is concerned but with all the curricula.

My intention is not to be pain in the neck to you all but to truly be a help. But where there is an obvious wall that is clearly not in the best interest of our kids, I will do what I can to break it down.

I am a bit perpelxed as to the reports I have heard some of you make concerning the number of calls, or lack thereof, and the supportive nature of them. I myself have had over 15 calls and every one has been affirmative. There has not been one dissenting call. The letters to the editor of the Sentinel also seem to reflect the same.

The issue of teen sexuality is not an easy one and a "just say no" approach, in and of itself, is admittedly simplistic. But the abstinence-based programs you have been informaed of do not simply "preach", Don't do it! They deal with the whole person, self esteem, responsibility and scientific facts to make a program that changes behavior which is what we all desire.

Thank you for your efforts and concern for our children. I have enclosed some informational sheets I hope you will take time to peruse.

John Doe
Parent

CC: Principal
Board Members

Strategies for responding:

1. Encourage the board members to listen carefully but avoid committing to a specific outcome prior to hearing all sides of an issue.

2. To ensure that board members hear from proponents, ask the advisory committee members, including student members, to contact board members and voice their support.

3. Remain in close contact with board members monitoring their responses to opponents' input. Provide them with additional information, as needed, to counter any false claims or misrepresentations of the curriculum.

4. Have students present, who are willing to articulate for the board the reasons why young people need sexuality and HIV/AIDS prevention education.

h. Use of Media to Air Their Concerns

Opponents will readily engage the media in the debate about sexuality and HIV/AIDS education. In the view of media persons controversy makes great copy. It is important to use the media constructively and to provide them with an accurate picture of what is happening. "The first person to reach the media with a story usually has the most credibility" (Dyer). The following is a list of tips for working with the media prior to and in the midst of a controversy.

## Tips on Working with the Media

Remember: If you have a good relationship with the media, communicating with them during a controversy will go much more smoothly.

### In Calm Times

* Get to know local reporters who usually cover education issues. Meet with them and provide basic information about your school.
* Identify a person at your school who the media can contact when information is needed.
* Inform reporters of events that may be newsworthy.
* Send a list of ideas for interest stories to the editor which they can follow up on when it's a slow news day.

### In Times of Controversy

* Understand the media's point of view. They do not exist to serve as a cheerleader for your school. They exist to report the news and controversy attracts attention.
* When a controversy erupts, keep cool and never get emotional when speaking with the media.
* Stay on guard, even with a media representative whom you have established ties with.
* Be prepared ahead of time. Outline the points you wish to make before speaking with media representatives.
* Work with those school representatives who are likely to be contacted by the media to address the issue, i.e., administrators, school board members, advisory committee members and practice responding to possible questions.
* Identify a spokesperson who the media can trust and who has the information and authority to speak about the situation.
* Be sure to let all appropriate staff, especially the receptionist or secretary, know how the organization will be handling inquiries about the controversy.
* Be accessible. Respond promptly to media calls.
* Be honest. If you do not have the answer to a question, say so. Offer to get back to them with information when possible. If you are not at liberty to provide information, explain why not.

* Never say "no comment" or go "off the record." This fuels hostility. Instead, if a question is inflammatory, redirect the question using it to illustrate a point you wish to make.

* If a reporter asks a question which involves speculation, don't speculate. For example, if a reporter asks "if x should happen what will you do?" respond by emphasizing that you have no way of knowing what will happen in the future.

* If you want to make a crucial point during an interview, repeat it several times and ask the reporter to repeat to you what he/she heard.

* If necessary, set-up a meeting with media outlets to provide them with information to assist them in forming an educated opinion about the issue at hand.

* Before responding to negative publicity, take time to evaluate the situation: Is the publicity factual? Is it distorted? Is it an individual comment or part of a concerted organized attack? Will a response sufficiently contribute to your goals by correcting errors in facts and restating policies or will it work more to the advantage of the critic, attracting more attention and unnecessary publicity for them and their point of view.

* If you do decide to respond to negative publicity, you can contact the reporter, giving them a chance to correct any factual errors or you can write a letter to the editor correcting any factual errors and restating the school's position on the issue

Prepared by Mary Madden, Family life Educator, with assistance from Jane Fisher and Dick Dyer, public relations specialists.

## Working with the School Board during Controversy

The school board is a lightening rod for controversy. In the event of a controversy they will be in position to make decisions about policies, procedures and curriculum. It is important that controversy not be allowed to tear the board apart, but rather, that the board have control and that they provide the necessary leadership to move forward in making decisions that will be in the best interest of the students.

Strategies:

1. Maintain open communication between administrative staff and board members. If controversy is in the wind let them know immediately.

2. Insist that board members keep open communication with administrative staff and other board members. Insist that board or administrators not be surprised by individual board members actions such as writing letters to the newspaper to air a concern about policy or curriculum.

3. Provide board members with sufficient background information about controversial issues enabling them to make well-informed decisions.

4. Remind the board of policies they have implemented and encourage them to make their decisions based on the policies.

5. If controversy erupts, the board should listen carefully to all opinions. Compromises which do not sacrifice the integrity of policies or curriculum should be explored.

6. Encourage the board not to delay decisions. Delay allows time for fuel to be added to the fire.

7. If the opposition supplies a board member(s) with false written claims about the sexuality and HIV/AIDS education, provide them with accurate information to refute the claims.

8. If negative stories or editorials are aired or printed in the news, contact individual board members to ask how this publicity is affecting their views and take action if their opinions are being negatively affected.

9. Appoint one person who will speak to media about board decisions. This person should restrict their information to that which is factual.

## Keeping Staff Informed During the Controversy

All staff need to be kept updated about the school's efforts in sexuality and HIV/AIDS education. These updates will be even more important if controversy erupts. Teachers should **not** have to rely on the media to find out what's happening at their school. Provide information on the controversy, the school's position and encourage staff members to provide support for their peers who may be involved.

As administrator, you need to provide visible and ongoing support for staff who are in the midst of controversy. They need to know that you back their work and that they will not be left to face the controversy alone or "hung out to dry" for following the school's curriculum guidelines.

## The Role of the Community Advisory Committee During Controversy

The task of the community advisory committee is to publicly and vocally support the curriculum. If a controversy erupts they should meet to determine a plan of action. This plan should outline ways which can demonstrate their support and encourage others to publicly demonstrate support. Some potential strategies include:

1. Continually and publicly refuting any false claims made about the curriculum in their interactions with individuals.

2. Respond to newspaper articles or letters to the editors declaring their support for the curriculum.

3. Hold one-to-one meetings with community leaders to explain the program and solicit their support and ask them to attend public meetings and/or contact school board members to voice support.

4. Contact individual school board members to restate their support for the curriculum.

5. Circulate petitions to supportive parents for their signatures to be submitted to the school board.

6. Write letters of support and appreciation to school staff involved in the controversy.

7. Personally contact supportive parents and community members to encourage them to attend school board meetings and write letters to principals, superintendents and school board members.

## Public Meetings During Times of Controversy

Public meetings or forums present both opportunities and challenges. It is an opportunity to publicly address any charges, expose errors and misrepresentation put out by the opposition, and to clearly present the goals, objectives, subject material and teaching methods of the program. Information about past program evaluations are helpful in relaying the value of a program. The challenge is that public meetings will bring the opponents out in force. Unlike supporters of sexuality and HIV/AIDS education, they are vigilant about their attendance at public meetings which might be of relevance to their concerns.

It will be a challenge to assure that all sides are heard, and that forward movement occurs. Tips for productive meetings include:

1. Recruit supporters; parent, teachers, students and community leaders to attend the meeting and voice their support. An advisory committee can take on the task of recruiting individuals.

2. Contact the meeting chairperson prior to the meeting to decide on guidelines which will ensure a fair and orderly process. State these guidelines at the start of the meeting and insist that those in attendance observe them. Some suggested guidelines include:

   a. have speakers preregister
   b. allow only one speaker per organization
   c. have speakers identify their place of residence, their role (ie. parent, teacher, student), and the name of any group they are representing. If the speaker is a parent, have them state which school their child attends
   d. limit each person's speaking time
   e. limit audience applause or reactions

3. Prior to hearing from speakers, you can voice for the board and the audience the potential charges and claims about sexuality and/or HIV/AIDS education that they will be likely to hear and address any inaccuracies or misrepresentation of the curriculum. This diffuses the effect of the oppositions statements and scare tactics.

4. Do not allow personal criticism of staff members in a public forum. If it happens, let the person(s) know about the policy which they can use to voice concerns about staff.

5. Call for a short recess if things get out of hand.

## Conclusion

As educators, the better we become at anticipating and managing controversy the more likely we are to move our agenda forward. Opponents use the tactics of banding together, supporting each other, and being persistent. I would suggest that we can be successful in minimizing the opposition's effects on HIV/AIDs education by using the same tactics; banding together, supporting each other and being persistent.

I would invite educators who are challenged by the opposition to share the opponents tactics and your responses which have proven successful. In sharing these experiences with each other, we can improve our skills in averting and, if necessary, dealing with controversy.

I would like to leave you with this thought;

> "Managers solve problems. Leaders confront dilemmas. Leaders reframe impossible dilemmas into novel opportunities. [This] cannot be done by clinging to old ways...it takes a collective look backward, inward, and ahead [by] administrators, teachers, parents, students, and other members of the school community" (Deal).

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